



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

Grey divorce rates climbing

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News October 21, 2012

GREY divorce! What's that all about? Good question.

Grey divorce refers to couples splitting after the age of 50.

Although overall divorce rates have declined since spiking in the 1980s, grey divorce has risen to its highest level on record. In Canada grey divorce has been steadily growing among those 55 with no end in sight. In America, among people ages 50 and older, the divorce rate has doubled over the last two decades. Across Europe the trend of "silver separations" is up and in Japan the number of divorces among those married for more than 30 years has quadrupled over the past two decades.

We know that grey divorce is real but it's a trend that is so new that there is barely any research on the topic. One of the first studies on grey divorce was commissioned in 2004 by the American Association of Retired Persons AARP.

The study looked at more than 1,000 men and women who had divorced in their late 40s, 50s and 60s. Cheating doesn't appear to be the driving force in grey divorce. About 27 per cent of divorcees cited infidelity as a reason for divorce which is in line with the divorce statistics of the general population. One in four said they had simply fallen out of love or had no previous problems and three in four thought they made a sound decision and had few regrets. Those in their 60s and 70s reported that they were "relishing life" after their divorce. And fellas, here's a statistic that will send a chill down your spine: woman are seeking the split 66 per cent of the time.

So what's going on here? Why are baby boomers breaking up in life like no generation before? The answer appears to be because they want to and because they can. Most sociologists argue that boomers are the first generation to enter marriage with the expectation that marriage would make them happy rather than on how well each partner would fulfil their marital roles. For a lot of people the age of 50 represents a kind of magic number that triggers thoughts of mortality and a vanishing possibility for self-fulfillment.

Deidre Blair, author of *Calling it Quits: Late Life Divorce and Starting Over*, says, "with the children out of the house, boomers in unhappy marriages often look at each other and think, 'I may have another 25 to 35 years to live. Do I want to spend it with this person?' There is an overwhelming urgent feeling among them of, 'I have to strike out now or I'll never have the chance again.'" Yet striking out on one's own doesn't always offer a panacea: almost 30 per cent of those in the AARP survey spoke of loneliness and depression; almost half expressed the fear of being alone and 28 per cent of woman feared financial destitution.

It's clear that woman and men experience a different set of complications in their life as a result of their divorce. Woman often bring fewer financial assets into the marriage and almost always leave in the same way. Men are

more likely to see a major decline in contact with at least one child, compared to stably married fathers whereas divorced mothers tend to get closer with their children.

One of the more novel ideas that I came across was that going forward each of us would have multiple marriages over the course of our lifetimes and that would become the norm. There would be starter marriage, a marriage to raise children and a third marriage for companionship. Actually the research suggests that for woman, at least, one marriage proves to be enough and the tendency is not to remarry but to live together.

One last statistic before we wind this up. Fifty-three per cent of the people over 50 that are now getting divorced in America (comparable Canadian statics are not available) have done so at least once before. Where can these unlucky persons find a date? Well there's always the Internet. According to online data analysis, the number of dating site users 50 and older has grown twice as rapidly as any other age group.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions_view@telus.net.